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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the high school dropout problem in Austin, Texas, this report presents statistics on dropouts, describes characteristics of dropouts, examines reasons for and consequences of dropping out, and explores how to prevent this problem. The report indicates that: (1) Hispanics drop out at higher rates than Blacks or Whites; (2) males drop out more often than females; (3) dropouts tend to have low grades, dislike school, come from low income families, and receive little parental support for staying in school; (4) reasons for dropping out include academic failure, non-school interests, economic need, health problems, and conflicts with school personnel; and (5) the unemployment rate of dropouts is double that of graduates. It is suggested that reducing the dropout rate in Austin requires districtwide commitment and a coordinated approach that addresses the problem at all grade levels. It is further suggested that to be effective, dropout prevention programs must (1) ensure that all students will develop a minimum of basic academic skills, (2) include components that will enable students to meet their economic needs, (3) provide attractive activities, (4) focus on improving achievement, especially among disadvantaged students, and (5) be based on clear plans of action. The report includes case descriptions of some high school dropouts. (MJL)

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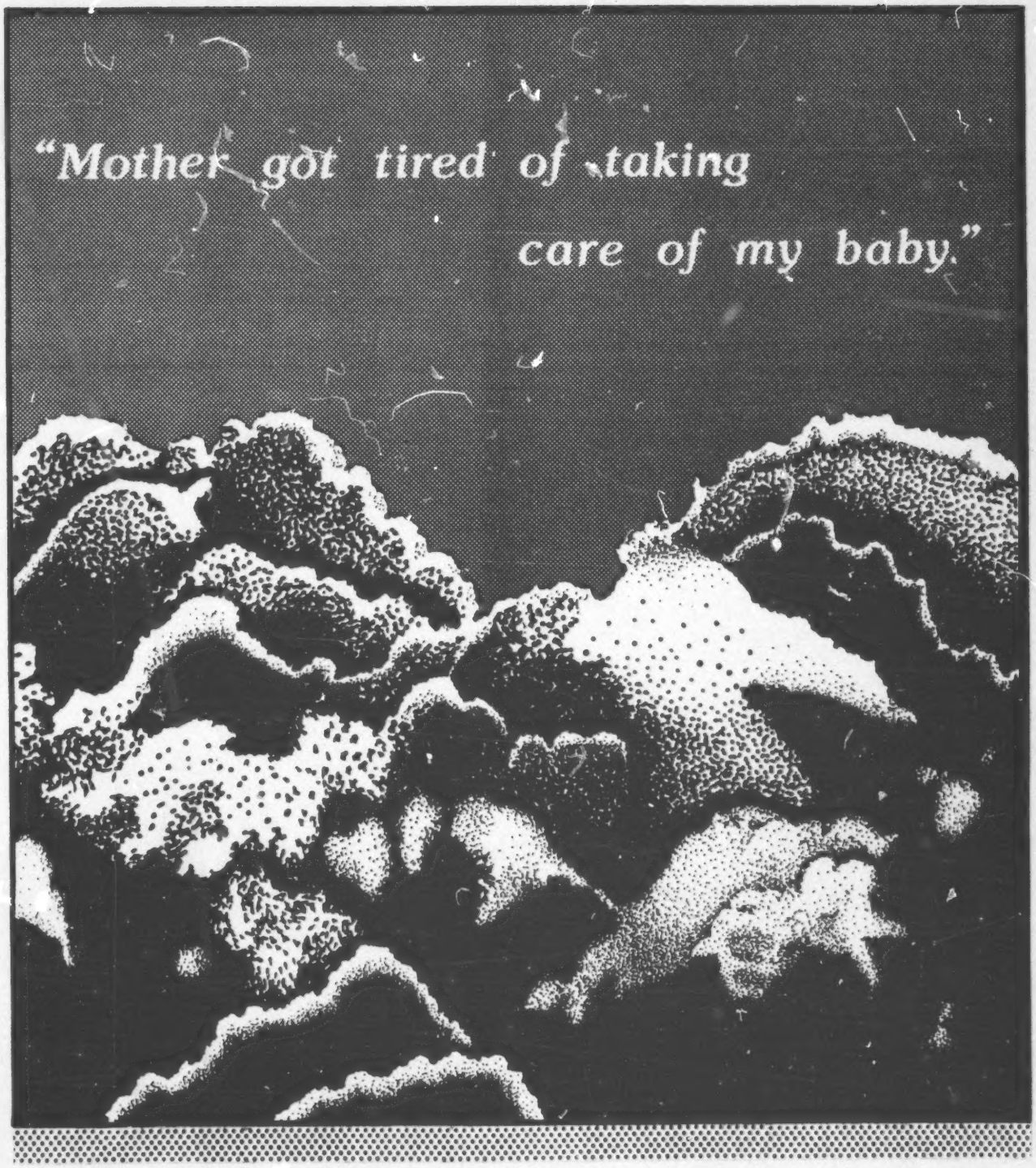

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A Study of Dropouts

82.44

"MOTHER GOT TIRED OF TAKING CARE OF MY BABY."

A Study of Dropouts From AISD

The title is the response of an AISD dropout who was asked why she left school. She is one of about 1,000 students who leave AISD schools each year without completing their formal education, without learning skills that will prepare them for success in an increasingly complex world. She will probably pay a high price for dropping out, as will her baby and her city. This report summarizes the findings of a study by ORE that examines the dropout problem in Austin.

WHAT IS A DROPOUT?

Every year a large number of students leave AISD never to return. Some transfer to other school districts; some go to private schools; a few go to the armed services. A few drop out. For the purpose of our study, dropouts were defined as students who left AISD and for whom we could find no evidence that they entered another school or school district where they could receive a high school diploma.

We began the study by identifying all students enrolled in AISD in 1978-79 who were at least fourteen years old, but not yet fifteen on September 1, 1978. Their pattern of entry and exit from the District was recorded from the 1978-79 school year through the fall semester of 1983 when the students were 18 or 19 years old. No other students were added to the study as they entered the District. The school records of those who left AISD and did not return were examined to determine whether or not a transcript was requested by another school or school district. Those without transcript requests were considered to be dropouts.

DOES AUSTIN HAVE A DROPOUT PROBLEM?

The answer is "Yes," but we must see the problem in perspective. As the following paragraphs will show, Austin has a dropout problem very much on a par with the national average. First, an examination of the national dropout rate. In 1979, a study of young people nationwide found the following dropout rates:

Total:	18%
Hispanic:	36%
Black:	24%
Anglo:	16%

They also found that Hispanic women were more likely to drop out than Hispanic males (39% vs. 32%), but among Blacks and Anglos, men were more likely to drop out than women (25% vs. 22% for Blacks and 17% vs. 14% for Anglos). The Ford

Status	Number	Percent
Graduated	2,438	48%
Transferred	745	15%
Still Enrolled	527	10%
Dropped Out	942	19%
Other Leavers	387	8%
Total	5,039	100%

Figure 1. STATUS OF STUDENTS INCLUDED IN STUDY AS OF FALL 1982.

Group	Dropouts	Total in Group	Percentage of Total
Hispanic	335	947	35%
Males	180	478	38%
Females	155	469	33%
Black	186	670	28%
Males	97	329	29%
Females	89	341	26%
Anglo and Other	421	2,282	18%
Males	216	1,176	18%
Females	205	1,106	19%
Total Males	493	1,983	25%
Total Females	449	1,916	23%
Total	942	3,899	24%

Figure 2. DROPOUT RATE BY SEX AND ETHNICITY. Excludes transfer and other leavers.

Foundation reported slightly different dropout rates:

Hispanic:	45%
Black:	28%
Anglo:	17%

According to the 1980 census, the percentages of young persons aged 18-19 who had dropped out, graduated, or were still in high school were as follows:

	Graduates	In High School	Dropouts
Hispanic:	54%	15%	31%
Black:	56%	21%	23%
Anglo:	75%	9%	16%

These values describe the national situation. The dropout rate will vary, however, from location to location. For example, a recent newspaper article reported a rate of 40% for the state of Mississippi.

WHAT IS THE AUSTIN SITUATION?

Figure 1 shows that only half of the fourteen-year olds in our study have remained in the District and graduated. About 20% of the original group are known to have dropped out; however, this figure is a conservative estimate of the dropout rate because it was calculated with the transfer students and other leavers counted as nondropouts. Other leavers are students for whom we could find no record or students for whom neither the dropout nor transfer classification seemed adequate. Examples would be deceased students or those who joined the armed services or were sent to prison. If we remove these other leavers from the total, the dropout rate becomes 24% (942/3907). Whether the dropout rate is 20% or 24% is not important. What is important is that these 942 students represent a large proportion of the students in our study. Put another way, they represent an annual increase of about 1,000 in the number of Austin adults who are poorly equipped to face the demands of our increasingly complex society.

WHO DROPS OUT?

Young men and women drop out from all high schools in Austin. They represent all ethnic groups and all economic levels. However, the dropout rates are not the same for all groups. Figure 2 shows the number and percentage of students dropping out by sex and ethnicity. The results show that Hispanic students drop out at about twice the rate of Anglo and Other students and that Black students drop out at a rate intermediate between Hispanics and Anglos. In general, males drop out at a slightly higher rate than females. In preparing this table, the transfers and other leavers were removed from the calculations.

What other student characteristics might also be related to dropping out? A limited examination of the professional literature revealed that as a group dropouts may have the following characteristics:

1. Dropouts tend to be behind in their school work. They are often behind in grade, have a low GPA and low achievement test scores, and have earned few credits for their age.

2. Often they do not like school or their teachers.

3. They are more likely to come from low-income families.

4. They may not have a father at home, and they do not receive strong parental support and encouragement for staying in school.

In order to see if Austin dropouts were similar to those in the other studies, we tried to distinguish dropouts from graduates and students still in school using characteristics available from central computer files. These characteristics included grade in 1978-79, sex, ethnicity, previous year's GPA, and the number of serious discipline incidents on the student's file. Grade point average was the single best measure for distinguishing between the two groups. Students with lower GPA's were more likely to drop out.

Next came grade. Students who were in the eighth grade or less at age 14, that is, those who were below grade level, were much more likely to drop out; conversely, students who were in the tenth grade or above were much less likely to drop out. Figure 3 shows the dramatic difference in dropout rates for students who were below, at, or above grade. Over half of the Hispanic males who were behind a grade or more dropped out. The same is true for females of any ethnicity.

An associated finding of interest is the large number of these students who were below grade nine in 1978-79. Figure 4 shows the number of students by sex and ethnicity who were at grade eight or below regardless of their future drop status. Fully one quarter of the students were at least one grade behind. The percentages ranged from a high of 47% for Black males to a low of 12% for Anglo females. In all of the analyses concerning grade, why the students were behind by a grade or more was unknown. They may have entered school late; they may have been retained in elementary school, or they may have failed too many classes in junior high to be promoted.

The third best predictor of dropout status was ethnicity. All other things being equal, Black students are <u>less</u> likely to drop out than Hispanics or Anglos, and Hispanics and Anglos are equally likely to leave school. On the surface, this finding seems to contradict the fact that Hispanics and Blacks have higher dropout rates than Anglos. The reason for this apparent discrepancy is that things are not equal. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than Anglos to have low GPA's or to have been retained. Therefore, while low-achieving Anglo students who are behind one or more grades are just as likely to drop out as similar Hispanic students and are more likely to drop out than similar Black students, there are fewer such Anglo students. Consequently, the overall dropout rate is lower for Anglos.

Group	Dropouts	Total Number	Percentage of Total
Males	493	1,983	25%
Below Grade Level	239	532	45%
Hispanics	102	191	53%
Blacks	55	141	39%
Anglo and Others	82	200	41%
On Grade Level	249	1,341	19%
Hispanics	78	280	28%
Blacks	41	172	24%
Anglos and Others	130	889	15%
Above Grade Level	5	110	5%
Hispanics	0	7	0%
Blacks	1	16	6%
Anglos and Others	4	87	5%
Females	449	1,916	23%
Below Grade Level	188	344	55%
Hispanics	78	136	57%
Blacks	57	102	56%
Anglos and Others	53	106	50%
On Grade Level	251	1,393	18%
Hispanics	76	313	24%
Blacks	32	210	15%
Anglos and Others	143	870	16%
Above Grade Level	10	179	6%
Hispanics	1	20	5%
Blacks	0	29	0%
Anglos and Others	9	130	7%
All Below Grade Level	427	876	49%
All On Grade Level	500	2,734	18%
All Above Grade Level	15	289	5%

Figure 3. DROPOUT RATES BY SEX, ETHNICITY, AND GRADE RELATIVE TO AGE IN 1978-79. Students below grade level were in grade 8 or lower in 1978-79. Students above grade level were in grade 10 or higher.

	Black		Hispanic		Anglo & Other		Total	
Sex	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	189	47%	243	43%	344	22%	776	30%
Female	134	33%	182	31%	181	12%	497	20%
Total	323	40%	425	37%	525	17%	1,273	25%

Figure 4. NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL WHO WERE ONE OR MORE GRADES BELOW THAT EXPECTED FOR THEIR AGE IN 1978-79.

Year	Age	School Year N	School Year %	Summer N	Summer %	Total N	Total %
78-79	14-15	94	10%	54	6%	148	16%
79-80	15-16	117	12%	47	5%	164	17%
80-81	16-17	197	21%	66	7%	263	28%
81-82	17-18	233	25%	75	8%	308	33%
82-83	18-19	59	6%	--	--	59	6%
Total	14-19	700	74%	242	26%	942	100%

Figure 5. NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF DROPOUTS BY TIME OF DROPPING OUT. "School year" students attended school for part of the school year. "Summer" students completed school year but did not return.

Gregg Tarpley
Crockett High School

Perhaps the most significant implication of thi finding is that there are no negative, ethnically related influences operating independently of the school-related characteristics included in these analyses. That is, there are no cultural characteristics unique to any of the groups that tend to contribute significantly to dropping out. Any unique cultural characteristics related to dropping out must operate through the other variables found to be significant in these analyses--academic success (GPA and grade relative to age), level of discipline problems, and sex. This suggests that programs aimed at reducing the dropout rate need not address culture-specific characteristics apart from their impact on learning and school success.

Finally, sex and the number of discipline incidents were slightly related to dropping out. Girls were more likely to drop out than boys of the same ethnicity, grade, and achievement level. The more discipline incidents students had on their records, the more likely they were to leave school early.

In summary, students who are earning low grades, who are behind one or more grades, who are in trouble with school authorities, and who get little support from their parents for staying in school are at greater risk for dropping out. Their risk is also increased if they are Hispanic or Anglo and if they are female. Of course, many students with these characteristics to not drop out, and some students with none of these characteristics do drop out. The point is that high risk students can be identified from readily available information.

WHEN DO THEY DROP OUT?

Figure 5 shows the pattern of dropping out for the 942 dropouts in our study by year. Sixteen percent dropped out during the first school year or did not return for the second. As the figure illustrates, these students were only 14 or 15 years old during that year. One third of the students dropped out before the legal age for leaving school. The year with the greatest number of dropouts was the one which should have been their senior year. One third dropped out then. Overall, three times as many students dropped out during the school year as during the summer. If students completed a school year, they were more likely to come back for at least a few days the following year than to drop out during the summer.

WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT?

From the studies and analyses reported above, it is clear that being behind in school both in terms of grade level and in-class performance is related to dropping out. Students who drop out usually do not like school. Furthermore, a low level of parental support and encouragement for staying in school also seems to be related to leaving school. In order to get more first-hand information about dropping out, we interviewed about 100 of the dropout students in our study.

The interviews provided the information in the paragraphs below. Furthermore, the brief "case studies" in this report are composite descriptions based on the interview responses of several students. As such, they do not describe the lives of any individual students; however, each situation described in the case studies was reported by at least one student.

The interviews showed that often the generalities that can be used to describe dropouts as a whole do not apply to individual students. The paths to dropping out may all end at the same spot, but they each have their own unique twists and turns along the way.

There were few if any simple cases where one or two factors contributed overwhelmingly to the student's decision to leave school. Despite the frequent appearance of identifiable precipitating events which provided the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, the mass of weight favoring dropping out accumulates over many years.

SCHOOL-RELATED REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT

The reasons students gave for dropping out seemed to fall into two classes: school-related reasons and personal/economic reasons. The reasons were also classified as being of primary or secondary importance to dropping out. It is not surprising that a study of separation from school would find school-related reasons as the primary factors in dropping out. Often the dropouts were far behind their peers in achievement; their grades were low, and they had earned few credits for their age. This lack of academic preparation and success was the most frequently mentioned reason for dropping out. When the dropouts were approached about the interview, they were given a copy of the questions to look at while the interview took place. One young man agreed to the interview on the condition that the interviewer read all the questions. He said he quit school because he had never learned to read, and he was not going to be interviewed if he had to read. Surprisingly, his responses were among the most thoughtful and articulate of the whole study, indicating perhaps an undiagnosed learning disability.

Another class of school-related reasons for dropping out concerned the students' attitudes toward school. Given their history of failure at school, it is not surprising that many of the students disliked school, and they reported being bored with school. Only about 5% reported conflict with teachers and/or administrators as their primary reason for dropping out. About 12% reported conflict or disciplinary problems as a secondary reason. In reviewing student records for the study, it was not uncommon to find students with one, two, three, or more semesters of all F's. Attending school must be extremely aversive under such conditions. If students do not already dislike school, they soon will. Then they opt to leave at the first opportunity.

The third group of school-related reasons for dropping out may be unique to this cohort of students. Many of them were transferred for desegregation purposes during the third year of the study. About 10% listed transfer-related reasons as the primary or secondary factors in their dropping out.

Case Study 1: Jesse

I found Jesse at home in the early afternoon. He looked as if he had not been awake long. He lives with his parents who were at work. He was very interested in the interview because he thought it would give him a chance to tell his side of the story. He also seemed glad to have someone to talk to.

Jesse thought his dropping out could be traced to his being "kicked off" the football team in the seventh grade. "After that I started hanging out with the wrong kids. Almost all of us have dropped out. We started doing a lot of drinking in the eighth grade. That made it hard to get up in the morning. I was late to school lots of times. I got real bored with school then. My last year in school was fun, though. I hardly never went. I'd meet my friends there in the morning. Then we'd go play pool, or go drinking at the lake. Or, you know, we'd just mess around. I had more fun that year than any other. You know, they ought to have rock 'n roll shows at school. That would get kids to come."

"I got in grouble a lot for skipping all the time. I got picked on because my older brother was a troublemaker when he was there. Then I got expelled for the rest of the year. And it wasn't even my fault. I got in a fight with three Black dudes that jumped me from behind. That's right. They jumped me from behind, but the people who seen it wouldn't say the truth, so I got kicked out for the rest of the year. Those teachers and principals are always partial to the Blacks. They jumped me from behind, and they didn't miss a single day, and I got kicked out for the whole year. Well, I decided then and there that I wouldn't come back. My mom and dad didn't like it much, but my dad understood that it was the right thing to do under the circumstances."

I asked what he had been doing since he quit school. "My dad said I had to get a job if I wasn't going to school. I've been working at Jack in the Box. But I quit. They gave a girl a promotion that should have been mine, so I quit. I haven't found anything else yet. It's hard to get a good job without finishing high school. I think I might go to night school, but I haven't had time to find out about it yet."

This sketch is a composite description based on interview responses of several dropouts. It does not describe any one specific person.

Case Study 2: Benny

I interviewed Benny in the small frame house he shares with his wife and two children. The family had just come home from work, and his wife, Janie, was in the kitchen preparing dinner while we talked. Benny works as a laborer in construction and Janie, also a dropout, works in a laundry. The children stay with Janie's mother during the day.

"School was okay, you know." said Benny. "I never got in no trouble, and I was doing alright. My grades were okay," he said as he scooped up the shy little girl who had been spying on us from the kitchen door. Sitting down with her in his lap, he continued. "I've nothing bad to say about the school. Everything is okay. I had lots of friends in school, and I never had no hassles with teachers or the principal. But Janie and I, we wanted to get married without telling nobody. You see, it didn't have anything to do with school. We just wanted to get married, and we couldn't do both. When I took Janie home my parents hit the ceiling. They were really mad. But what could they do, we were already married. At least they liked Janie, that helped. We lived with them for a while until we could find jobs. We had to move back with them a couple of times when Janie was pregnant and couldn't work, you know."

I asked him if he ever regretted getting married and leaving school. "You know," he said, "I wish we could of stayed in school. I'm working in the dirt now. It's real hot where Janie works, you know it's real bad in the summer. I don't want us to have to work this way all our lives. If we had graduated, we could find better jobs. But I'm not sorry we got married. And like I said before, you can't do both. It was a mistake to leave school, but I'd do it again if there wasn't some way to get married and stay in school."

This sketch is a composite description based on interview responses of several dropouts. It does not describe any one specific person.

PERSONAL/ECONOMIC REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT

Almost half of the dropouts gave a personal/economic reason as their primary reason for dropping out. A surprising number, eight, reported a health-related problem as the primary reason. Six more gave pregnancy as the most important factor in their dropping out. Wanting to or having to work full time was given by 14 students as their primary reason for leaving. Other personal/economic reasons were wide ranging: death of a family member, pressure to drop out from friends and siblings, marriage, caring for someone (including children), and wanting to pursue interests outside of school. Several of the personal/economic reasons had a positive or attractive quality to them; i.e., the students were attracted to something outside the school more than they were repelled by school or forced out of school for some reason (e.g., by a health problem or economic need). If these "attractive" reasons such as wanting to work and wanting to marry are grouped together, about 13% could be counted as having been attracted away from school by other options. Another 12% reported having to work or having to leave school in order to care for someone else.

SUMMARY OF REASONS

In summary, a recipe for dropping out would begin with a large amount of academic failure. Flavor with the spice of attractive outside-of-school interests, and stew it in a broth of economic need, health problems, and conflict with teachers and administrators.

This recipe is consistent with the professional literature except that Austin students faced the temporary influence of the desegregation plan. In addition, the literature suggests that parental attitudes provide the pot in which to stew the ingredients. As part of our interview, dropouts were asked with whom they consulted before dropping out and what advice they received. Fifty-four percent reported consulting with at least one parent, and about 35% of these consulted with someone at school. Forty-six percent dropped out without consulting with anyone. Generally, the parents were more inclined to accept their child's decision while school personnel were more likely to advise the student to stay in school.

We usually assume that dropping out is "bad" and remaining in school is "good" and that encouraging or even coercing the students to stay in school is also "good." However, the interviews revealed that in many cases the decision to leave may have been a reasonable response to the situation, especially in those cases where the students were getting nothing from school and may have been disrupting the learning of others. The tragedy is that conditions had progressed to such an irrevocable point, a point where the choices were limited for all persons involved--the students, the parents, and the school personnel. In the long run, the students, their families, and the community will pay a price for their leaving without acquiring minimal, useful skills.

Case Study 3: Rachel

Rachel lived alone in a small house behind her grandmother's home. She had been living there for several years since her parents deserted her. They dropped her off at her grandmother's one day and never returned. They divorced. Her grandmother began complaining to me about Rachel as soon as the interview began--what a bad girl she was, what a burden she was to a poor old woman. We completed the interview outside.

Rachel never really liked school; and the older she got, the less she liked it. "I was so bored. You know, I could have made good grades if I wanted to, but it was so boring. I never did my work, and I talked a lot in class, so I got in trouble a lot. The teachers was prejudice, too. That made it worse. I also had lots of fights. You see, I was in a gang, well sort o' like a gang. My friends and I, we looked out for each other. You can't let anybody push you around. So I got kicked out sometimes. I missed my friends and it was kinda boring too, but not too bad. So one time I just didn't go back."

I asked if she had talked to anyone before deciding not to go back. "Hell, no! Who would I talk to? My parents, they ran off and deserted me. My grandmother don't know nothing about school. Them teachers and principals at school are prejudice. You know, the counselor called me into her office one time. Maybe she heard my parents had deserted me. I don't know. I told her, 'I don't like to tell people my problems. I like to keep them inside of me.' If you tell people about you, they can hurt you. If my parents had stayed together and helped me, I might of finished."

I asked her about the advantages and disadvantages of dropping out. She said the advantage was getting away from school. About disadvantages she said, "It's hard to find a job. The only one I can find is a maid or waitress. I've signed up for a GED class at the community school, but I haven't gone yet. I had some other things I had to do."

This sketch is a composite description based on interview responses of several dropouts. It does not describe any one specific person.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF DROPPING OUT IN STATISTICAL TERMS?

Dropouts are clearly at an economic disadvantage when compared with high school graduates. In 1970, almost 50% of Austin men 16-21 who were not high school graduates and who were not enrolled in a school were unemployed, although only 18% of the same-aged, nonenrolled high school graduates did not have jobs. In a study of 18-21 year olds done in Philadelphia in 1976, the unemployment rate among dropouts was 28% compared with 11% for graduates. According to a 1981 study, dropping out affects chances for employment of different ethnic groups differently: the employment discrepancy between dropouts and graduates is most acute for Hispanic women (36% vs. 7%) and for Anglo men (20% vs. 6%). These studies suggest that the unemployment rate of dropouts is at least twice the rate for graduates.

The Education Department reports income statistics on all persons 25 years of age or older. Males with one to three years of high school have an income that is only 86% of that of men with a high school diploma and no college. Women dropouts earn only 82% as much as women graduates. It seems likely that the gap between the groups will be greater for the students in our study because the Education Department statistics include many persons who attended school when a very large percentage of students did not graduate. Dropouts may represent a more select group than in the past, and the stigma associated with dropping out may be greater in an age when about 80% of all students graduate.

The low level of competence in basic skills possessed by the average dropout coupled with the expectation of a high level of unemployment and a low level of income presents the picture of an individual ill prepared to meet the challenges of our increasingly complex society, an individual chronically disposed to failure and frustration. The prospect from the point of view of the dropout is dismal.

If the future is dim for the dropouts, the fact that the public and the schools have allowed 20-25% of our youth to reach maturity without acquiring a minimal level of useful skills casts a shadow over the whole society to which they belong. The costs in human suffering and disappointment aside, the cost in lost productivity, in the increased need for social services, and in the overall quality of life are probably greater than we imagine.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

This country has made important improvements in the educational attainment of its citizens in the last 40 years. The percentage of persons aged 25 and over who have completed four years of high school or more has increased from about 25% in 1940 to nearly 70% in 1980. Reducing the dropout percentage to near zero, however, will require a considerable level of creative thinking, work, commitment, and coordination. Moreover, it is not something that the educational system is likely to accomplish working alone. It is the view of many educators that recent societal changes have placed tremendous stresses on our young people--stresses which disrupt and challenge the educational process as we know it. The other institutions in our society must share the responsibility for helping these children.

Regardless of how we share the responsibility with other institutions, the District must do what it can to lower the dropout rate. What follows is not a list of recommendations. Rather it is an attempt to stimulate discussion and thought by presenting propositions suggested by the study, for consideration by those with the expertise and the responsibility for addressing this problem. It seems essential that something be done; 940 students dropping out of one high school class is a staggering number.

Two basic conditions must be met before the dropout problem can be meaningfully reduced. First, a districtwide consensus must be reached that the number of dropouts from AISD is a serious problem that requires the attention and commitment of all.

Second, the dropout problem is a multifaceted educational problem that spans the grades. The key to prevention lies in a coordinated attack on the problem at all grades. It is not a problem to be dumped on secondary schools for a solution. As valuable as our programs at the secondary level may be, it is unlikely that they alone can ever be sufficient to handle a problem that has roots in early childhood.

It seems that if dropout prevention programs are to be effective, they must do two things:

1. They must ensure that all students who are capable develop a minimum of useful, basic, academic skills.

2. They must attract and hold students by including components to meet their economic needs and by providing activities sufficiently valuable and engaging to overcome the attractiveness of outside-of-school interests.

THE ACHIEVEMENT PROBLEM

Students who have not had success by the early elementary grades are likely to continue to fall farther and farther behind their peers.

Current attempts to boost the achievement of low-income children such as Title I/Chapter 1 have met with only moderate success, although local programs appear to have been very successful with preschool children. The public needs to be made aware of the fact that while such programs have not been as successful as one would have wished, they need continued support. Educators need to continue to search for more successful approaches within these programs.

The high dropout rate for Hispanics is likely to be related to the fact that many Hispanics have a home language other than English. Programs which ignore this situation and the associated problems in home/school communication are unlikely to solve the achievement problem.

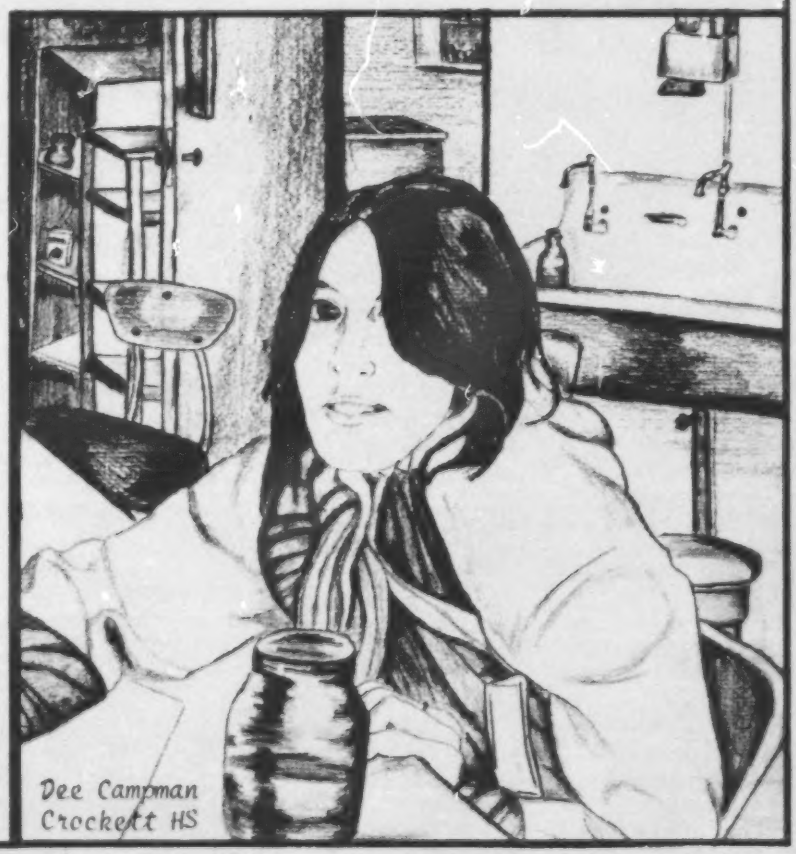
Case Study 4: Angie

Angie lives in a small, poorly maintained one-room apartment with her two daughters and a sometimes live-in boyfriend. The interview was interrupted periodically by the needs of her three-year old and her infant. Angie first became pregnant in the eighth grade. She moved into AISD with her mother at the start of her freshman year. She did not tell the school that she had a child, but the other students soon found out.

"Things got to be a mess real soon after school started. I really didn't like going to school. There were all those "stuck up" rich kids in their fancy clothes and fancy cars. They made me feel sloppy and poor. The school was new to me and I didn't have no friends. The other kids talked about me behind my back because I had a baby. If they didn't want to be my friend, I didn't want to be theirs."

I asked how she was doing academically when she left. She said, "I don't know. I didn't stay long enough to find out. Pretty soon my mother got tired of taking care of my baby. She couldn't spend enough time with her boyfriend, and my boyfriend got to bitching at me for not spending enough time with him. And I didn't have no money for Pampers. So I just quit going. I wish I didn't have no kids. I wished I had of finished. You know, it's real hard to find a good job. I had kids too early."

I asked if she had any plans for the future. "I'd like to get a GED," she replied. "Secretary training would be nice. I'd like to get married."



This sketch is a composite description based on interview responses of several dropouts. It does not describe any one specific person.

Case Study 5: John

I first visited John's house late in the afternoon. Only his sister, who appeared to be about eight, was home. She said John would be home later, so I explained what I wanted and told her I would return the following evening at seven. The next evening John, his mother, and his sister were all at home. After I introduced myself and explained the study, he and I went out and sat on the front steps to talk.

John explained that several years before he dropped out he had become very bored with school. "They teach you the same things over and over. How many times do you have to study about those Indians throwing tea in the water? And the books they have are ancient; it's hard to learn from them. After ten years in school, I still can't read or write very good. I didn't have many friends at school, and some that I had dropped out before I did. It was hard to make myself go to school every day. Maybe I would of stayed till I graduated, but my father deserted us. He got to drinking real bad, lost his job. Then one day he just left. I think he's living out of his pickup camper someplace around here, but I don't know where. I don't care, either. Well, when he left I knew my mother needed some help with the bills, so I told her I was quitting school to help. My father may be a drunk, but he raised me to do my part. My mother didn't want me to quit. She said I'd regret it later, but I was tired of school anyway. She couldn't make me go back, so I just quit."

I asked him if he discussed dropping out with anyone at school. "No," he said, "I never saw no reason to talk to a counselor or anybody. It had never done me any good to talk to them before. Besides, what choice did I have?"

I then asked what he had been doing since he left school. He said he had a job in a machine shop. "I've been working as a machinist. The pay is good, and I like my job. You know, I said I can't read or write very good, but I can run the machines when they show me how. It's interesting, too. You come by the shop sometime, and I'll show you what I can do."

Finally, I asked him about his plans. "Mom wants me to get a GED," he said, "but I think I'll wait a while."

This sketch is a composite description based on interview responses of several dropouts. It does not describe any one specific person.

Furthermore, summer school programs traditionally failed to significantly boost student achievement. However, the possibilities have not been exhausted. Summer programs still offer great potential for contributing to the solution of the achievement problem.

We must take an experimental approach and be ready to try structures and techniques which appear to have promise, and we must modify or abandon those that are unproductive. The cost of effective programs may be high, but the situation is like the oil filter commercial, "You can pay me now, or you can pay me later."

ATTRACTING AND HOLDING STUDENTS

Intertwined with the academic failure of typical dropouts is the belief that education does not have anything to offer them. If this perception truly is an important part of the dropping-out process, then it must be shattered if prevention is possible.

We must begin early to establish in the minds of the students a conviction that there is a strong and important link between school activities, the work they will do as adults, and the income, success, and happiness they will enjoy. THE EDUCATION OF ALL STUDENTS MUST BE SEEN AS VOCATIONAL EDUCATION, AS PREPARATION FOR THE DEMANDS OF ADULT LIFE.* How the conviction can be established is not clear, but it must be established early and nurtured throughout school. The motive power of the link between work and success is most clearly evident in school organizations such as sports teams, bands, and drill teams. Students will put out tremendous amounts of effort in these activities because they see the relationship between that work and the success of their organization. It is much more difficult to establish the delayed link between school work and life success (however defined), but it ought to be possible.

A modest level of academic success and belief in the link between education and success will not keep students in school as they get older if the link between school activities and work does not become even more obvious. Recent research at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education showed that students who are at a high risk for dropping out are more likely to stay in school if they concentrate on vocational education courses. Vocational training would seem to become very important for those students not pursuing a college degree. Should any student leave our schools unprepared for either college, some other type of advanced education, or some kind of work? There are also many students who never drop out but whose school experiences are largely a waste of time. These students and our society lose in direct proportion to the extent to which they are not fully engaged in their education. An academic course of study integrated into vocational studies would likely benefit many nondropouts as well.

** This statement can generate extensive debate about the relative merits of "academic" versus "vocational" education. We cannot become mired in such debate while 1,000 students each year are getting neither.*

Perhaps the high school experience should be expanded from four to six years for some students. Working in close cooperation with Austin Community College, labor unions, and businesses, students could receive extensive vocational training and stretch out their academic requirements over an extended period. Those progressing in the basic skills at a slower rate would have more time to reach the minimum competency requirement if needed. Alternately, courses with a strong vocational component could begin in earlier grades.

Finally, even with academic success and motivation to stay in school and learn, some students are forced to leave for economic reasons. Strong ties need to exist between the school district and other agencies to aid in meeting the economic needs of students. If the high school program were stretched to six years for some students, then perhaps work/study programs could begin early in high school.

OTHER PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Recent research to identify programs that are effective with marginal students and delinquents suggests several characteristics that dropout programs should follow.

First, the programs should have clear blueprints or plans of action. Plans may vary from program to program, but the key to success is having a blueprint and following it. Evaluation and the monitoring of program implementation are important related activities.

The more successful programs strengthen the ties between students and their school. Multiple small programs, each with 25-50 students and 2-6 faculty members, are probably more successful than a few large programs. If students and faculty know each other well, it is easier to build commitment to the program and the school. Teachers should have high expectations for student success, students should support program goals, and curriculum content should focus on real-life problems and situations.

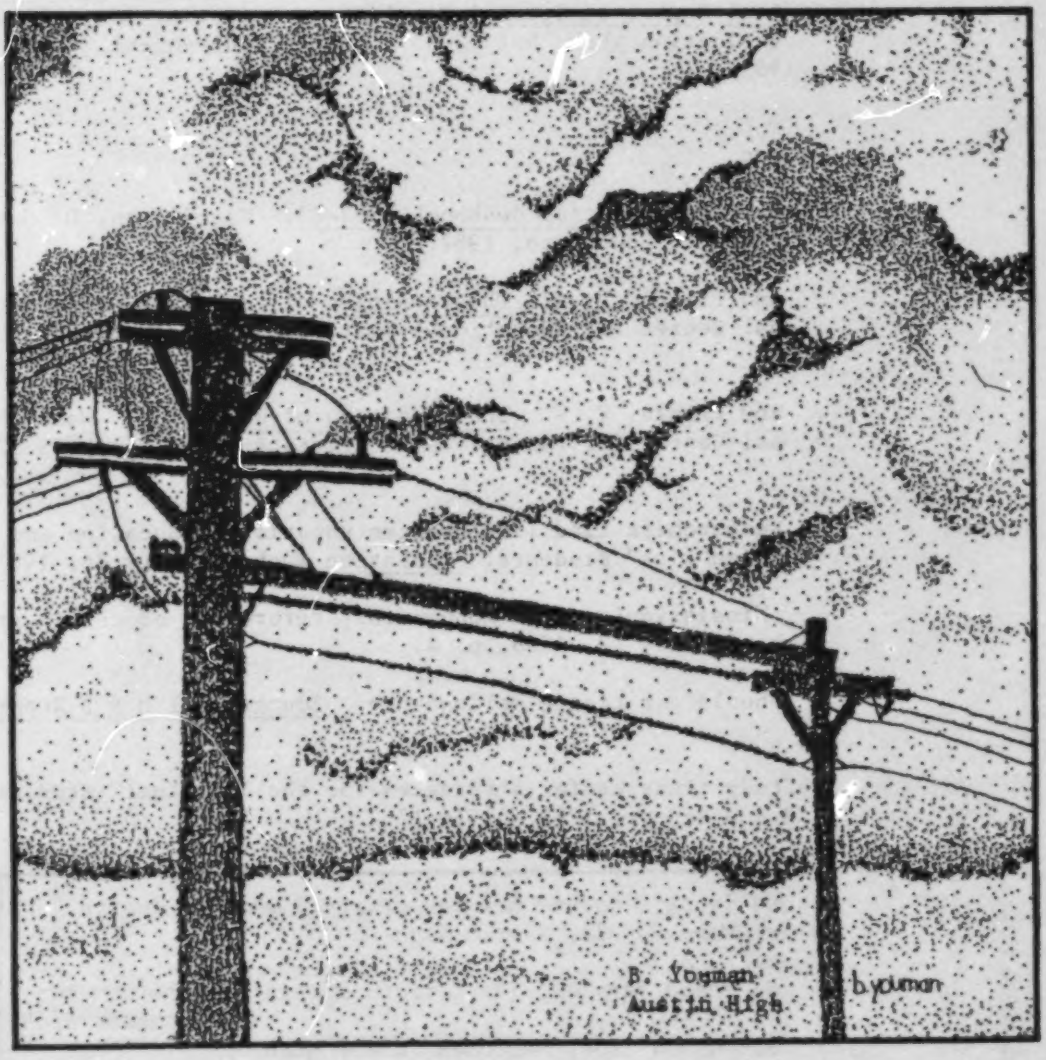
Finally, it seems important that students have a successful work experience in the community. Researchers think that many marginal students have not had opportunities for adequate social development. Through the work experience they develop friendships with adults which aid in that development.

The researchers suggest five general principles to follow in creating an experiential curriculum:

a. Experiences should provide optimal challenge with manageable conflict;
b. Experiences should require students to take initiative and responsibility;

c. Students must perceive their experiences as having integrity and dignity--not "make work" projects;
d. Experiences should provide opportunities for acquiring competence and success; and
e. Students must be encouraged to discuss and reflect on their experiences.

Early in this century, H. G. Wells wrote that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Sixty years later, as we enter an era of technological revolution, the success of individuals has become increasingly dependent upon their education. In this race, our young people and the society as a whole cannot afford the headstart each dropout gives to Catastrophe.



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All illustrations in this volume are the original work of Austin ISD students. *Cover: Mara Hafele, Austin High*
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